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## SKELETONS IN CHRIST'S FAMILY CLOSET

Matthew 1:1-17

By

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Special Christmas Message

### Skeletons in Christ's Family Closet Matthew 1:1-17

If you know much about your ancestors, it is likely that you know of a few skeletons in your family closet. The phrase refers to family members whose shameful ways and deeds the family would rather remain hidden from public view.

I don't know much about my ancestors. I can't even name my great-grandparents. But I do know that one of my great-grandfathers spent twenty years in the Indiana State Penitentiary on a murder charge. My dad has told me that he may have taken the rap for his son. But either way, there are some skeletons in our family closet!

The Bible doesn't keep the door shut on the skeletons in the family closets of its heroes. Even when it comes to tracing the ancestry of the Messiah, shows us the unsavory characters in the family line. The list includes (and even highlights) an adulterer who murdered his lover's husband to cover up the misdeed. There are idolaters, liars, and a man who committed incest with his daughter-in-law, whom he thought was a prostitute (which says something about his lack of morals). Another woman in the list was a prostitute. And, there is a notoriously wicked king who burned his sons to death as offerings to a pagan idol. It's a rather motley crew to produce the Savior of the world!

Matthew sets forth this tainted lineup as he traces the ancestry of Jesus the Messiah. In all honesty, it seems like a dull way to begin a book, much less to launch the New Testament! I doubt if any editor today would accept such an opening for any book. Most of us probably just skip these sections when we read through the Bible. Perhaps we wonder why God would take up space in the Bible with this boring list of difficult to pronounce names of people who lived thousands of years ago, half-way around the world. How is it relevant to us?

I suggest that this list of names is quite relevant for us. For one thing, all of these people lived for a short while and died. So

the list reminds us that we, too, will not live forever. Whether we die relatively young or live for a century, death and judgment before the God who knows all of our deeds is inevitable. And so the most relevant issue for each of us to be clear about is, "where will I spend eternity?" And, "how can I be sure of this?" You don't want to be wrong on such an important matter! You need to be sure that you have Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Christ's genealogy shows that God sent a Savior for sinners and that He fulfilled His promises in Jesus Christ.

1. God sent a Savior for sinners.

This list includes a broad spectrum of people. Some we know about, but others we know only by their names here. There are kings and commoners. Oddly for the patriarchal Jews, there are some women on the list. Also, oddly for a Jewish genealogy, three of those women were Gentiles, the fourth was married to a Gentile, and three were notorious for immorality. The list is obviously not fabricated, because no religious Jew would have put together a list like this if he were trying to impress his readers with the pedigree of the Messiah.

But everyone on the list shares something in common: whether they were relatively good people or notoriously bad, they all were sinners who needed a Savior. In Romans 1-3, Paul argues that everyone, whether pagan Gentiles or religious Jews, are guilty before God as sinners. He sums it up (Rom. 3:23), "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And so everyone needs a Savior. Even the godly virgin Mary, mother of the Messiah, acknowledged her need for a Savior when she prayed (Luke 1:47), "And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." She goes on to say (Luke 1:54-55) that through the One in her womb, God has remembered His *mercy* to Abraham and his descendants. Good people do not need God's mercy. *Sinners* need His mercy. Jesus is the Savior of sinners who cry out for God's mercy.

Let's look at the four other women (apart from Mary) in the list and see how each of them teaches us something important about God's salvation as provided in Jesus Christ.

- A. Tamar: The salvation that Christ brings is for sinners.

Tamar's story (Matt. 1:3) occurs in one of the most sordid chapters in the Bible, Genesis 38. Judah, her father-in-law, had taken a Canaanite wife, who bore him three sons. Judah took Tamar, a Canaanite woman, as a wife for his first son, but that son was evil in the Lord's sight and the Lord took his life. Judah then told his second son to go in to Tamar to conceive an heir for his deceased brother. When that son dodged his responsibility, the Lord killed him. Judah then promised Tamar that when the third son grew up, she could be married to him. But he either forgot or ignored his promise. Tamar then disguised herself as a prostitute, hiding her face under a veil. Not knowing that it was she, Judah had relations with her and she became pregnant with twins, Perez and Zerah. Perez was in the line that led to Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3).

Tamar's history illustrates that Jesus is the Savior of sinners. He deliberately associated with the tax collectors, who were notorious scoundrels. Matthew, the author of this gospel, was one when Jesus called him. Jesus was known as the friend of sinners (prostitutes and others, Matt. 11:19). When the religious Pharisees expressed their disgust with this, Jesus replied (Matt. 9:12), "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick." He added (Matt. 9:13b), "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." He did not mean that some are righteous enough to get into heaven on their own. Rather, He wanted the Pharisees to see that they were sinners who needed a Savior every bit as much as the tax collectors and prostitutes did.

You may think, "But I'm not as sinful as a prostitute or a swindler! I have my faults, but I'm not a *terrible* sinner!" Be careful! That was the mistake of the Pharisees. Their self-righteousness caused them to reject the Savior whom God sent. The angel who told Joseph that Mary had conceived through the Holy Spirit added (Matt. 1:21), "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." To benefit from the reason that Jesus came, you must recognize in the first place that you have sinned against the Holy God and that all of your good deeds will not atone for your sins. You need a Savior and Jesus is that Savior. But, how do we obtain this salvation?

- B. Rahab: The salvation that Christ brings comes to sinners through faith.

Rahab (Matt. 1:5) has come down to us in biblical history with the epithet, "the harlot." Just as we can't think of Thomas without thinking of "doubting," so we can't think of Rahab without thinking, "the harlot." Like Tamar, she was a Canaanite woman, excluded from God's covenant people. She lived in Jericho. She knew that the city was going to be destroyed and she believed in the God of the Hebrews, that "He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh. 2:11). So she hid the Hebrew spies and pleaded with them to spare her life and the lives of her family.

In the great New Testament chapter on faith, we read (Heb. 11:31), "By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace." But James 2:25 states, "In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" There is no contradiction. James is making the point that genuine saving faith is not merely intellectual assent. The demons have that kind of faith, but are not saved. Rather, saving faith always results in a life of obedience. Rahab proved that her faith was genuine by her obedience in risking her life to protect the Hebrew spies.

The balance between Hebrews and James regarding Rahab is especially important in our day. Many have been told that if they believe in Jesus as their Savior, they will receive eternal life and go to heaven. That is certainly true, but in many cases, these people do not understand what it means to believe in Jesus. It does *not* mean just to agree that He is your Savior, but then to go on living as you've always lived. Genuine saving faith always includes repentance for your sins. If you truly believe in Christ, you will live in obedience to Him. As 1 John 2:3 states, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." The fact that Rahab is listed here as the wife of Salmon shows that she turned from her life of prostitution. By faith in God's promise, she experienced His salvation. By His grace, she even became an ancestor of the Savior.

C. Ruth: The salvation Christ brings is for Gentiles condemned by the law, but redeemed by grace.

Like Tamar and Rahab, Ruth was a Gentile. She was a Moabite and thus outside of God's covenant people. Unlike Tamar, Ra-

hab, and Bathsheba, Ruth was a moral woman. She was married to a Jewish man who died. When her mother-in-law decided to return to Israel, out of love Ruth chose to go with her. She made the great confession (Ruth 1:16b), "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."

But as a Moabite woman, the Law of Moses excluded Ruth from the people of God (Deut. 23:3). As such, she is a type of those who are good, moral people. They are not flagrant sinners. But they are still under the curse of God's holy law. James 2:10 says, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." That condemns everyone, even those who are as good as Ruth was. Work your way through the Ten Commandments, interpreting them on the heart level as Jesus did (Matt. 5:21-30), and you will see that you stand guilty before God on every count!

How, then, did Ruth find her way into the genealogy of Christ? I cannot relate the story in detail here, but the short Book of Ruth tells how Ruth found grace and love in the eyes of a man who was her kinsman-redeemer. Boaz paid the price of redemption and took Ruth, the Moabite woman, as his bride. It's a beautiful picture of how Christ, our Redeemer, paid the price of our redemption with His own blood. As a result, we Gentiles, who formerly were excluded from God's people and, even if we were good people, were condemned by His law, were brought into His family as His chosen bride (Eph. 2:11-22)!

Thus Tamar shows that the salvation Christ brings is for sinners. Rahab teaches us that this salvation is received through faith. Ruth illustrates that God's salvation is for Gentiles condemned by the law but redeemed by His grace. That brings us to...

D. Bathsheba: The salvation that Christ brings is sufficient to preserve His people in spite of their sins.

In the Greek text, Matthew 1:6 does not name Bathsheba, but refers to her as "her of Uriah," a way of alluding to her and David's sin of adultery. Probably Bathsheba was a Jew (1 Chron. 3:5). As such, she and David remind us of the fact that even believers can fall into gross sin. While we should never justify or excuse such sin, Bathsheba's place among the ancestors of Christ shows us God's

grace in preserving His elect, even when they sin (Luke 22:31-32). We have the assurance (Phil. 1:6) that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

These four women illustrate from different angles the great news that God saves sinners. If you have failed terribly, God sent the Savior for you! Maybe you don't just have skeletons in your family closet. Maybe *you are* the skeleton! This genealogy invites you to come to Jesus and ask Him to save you from your sins. If you have trusted in Christ as Savior, but have fallen into serious sin, this genealogy invites you to turn back to Christ, experience His forgiveness, and walk in fellowship with Him again. In Christ, God sent a Savior for sinners.

## 2. God fulfilled His promises in Jesus Christ.

His name is stated in verse 1, “Jesus Christ”; again in verse 16, “Jesus ... who is called the Messiah”; and, in verse 17, “the Messiah.” The name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves.” “Christ” means “Anointed One” (Hebrew, “Messiah”) and points to Jesus as God's anointed Savior and King. Apart from this first chapter and one other time, when the mocking Pilate refers to “Jesus who is called Christ” (27:22), Matthew does not use the name Jesus Christ again. The title “Christ” is only used rarely. Otherwise, Matthew simply uses “Jesus.” Alexander Maclaren (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], on Matt. 1:1-16, p. 6) suggests that the purpose is “to assert and establish, at the very outset, His Messianic, regal dignity, as the necessary supposition to all that follows.”

The fact that we have here a *genealogy* of Jesus Christ (1:1) establishes an important truth: our faith is rooted in history, not in myth or legend. Matthew was writing primarily to first century Jews, who kept detailed genealogical records. If Matthew had fabricated this, the Jews would have challenged him on it. Granted, there are some difficult problems with the genealogy: Matthew arranges it into three groups of 14 each, but the third group only has 13 names. Various solutions have been suggested, but as yet, none are completely satisfactory (D. A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 8:68). Also, there are difficulties trying to harmonize the genealogies in Matthew and Luke (*ibid.*, 8:64-65).

A major part of our problem in trying to resolve these difficulties is that being 2,000 years removed from the gospel writers, we lack their sources. But Luke begins his gospel by stating his careful historical research (Luke 1:1-4). The fact that there are harmonistic problems between the gospels shows that the writers were not in collusion, fabricating a story to look good. They were eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus or they interviewed eyewitnesses. So even if we can't resolve every minor problem, we can trust the integrity of the record. And a major point of Matthew's genealogy is that we are dealing with a real person, descended from the royal line of David back to Abraham.

Joanne Shetler spent years in the Philippines with the Balangao people, translating the Bible into their language and trying to tell them the good news of the Savior. But it was slow going. One day Ama, a man who had "adopted" her as his Balangao daughter, picked up an English New Testament from her desk, opened it to this genealogy on page one of Matthew, and stared at it. He could read enough English to realize what he was seeing. Amazed, he asked her, "You mean this has a genealogy in it?"

She said, "Yeah, but just skip over that so you can get to the good part."

But his eyes were still riveted to the page. "You mean this is true?" he asked, as he struggled through the list of names.

Shetler got some shelf paper and wrote the genealogy from Adam to Jesus, from the ceiling down to the floor. Ama took it all over the village, explaining, "We always thought it was the rock and the banana plant that gave birth to people. But we don't have their names written down. Look, here are all the names—written down!"

The Balangaos loved Matthew's written genealogy. It proved the Bible was true. Ama came to believe in Christ as his Savior. He became an enthusiastic evangelist, church leader, and Bible translator. When the Balangao New Testament was finally dedicated, he got the very first copy (from *And the Word Came with Power*, Joanne Shetler with Patricia Purvis [Multnomah Press], pp. 81-82).

Matthew makes two main points with his genealogy:

A. God fulfilled His promise: Jesus is the son of David.

Matthew lists this first, above the fact that Jesus is the son of Abraham (1:1). Also, his three divisions may be summarized as: the origins of David's kingdom (2-6a); the rise and decline of David's kingdom (6b-11); and, the eclipse of David's kingdom (12-16). At the moment of despair, when it would seem that God's promise to David that his heir would occupy the throne forever was lost, Jesus the son of David, the promised Messiah was born!

We cannot say for certain why Matthew groups the genealogies into three groups of 14. It may have been a mnemonic device. He deliberately leaves out several generations of kings to achieve the number 14. It may be significant that in Hebrew, the name David adds up to 14 ("D" = 4, "V" = 6; 4 + 6 + 4 = 14). D. A. Carson suggests (p. 69), "And if the third set of fourteen is short one member, perhaps it will suggest to some readers that just as God cuts short the time of distress for the sake of his elect (24:22), so also he mercifully shortens the period from the Exile to Jesus the Messiah."

Note one other feature: Matthew is tracing Jesus' legal right to the throne through Joseph. But he makes an important shift in verse 16. Up to this point, he has said, "So and so was the father of so and so," etc. But when he gets to Joseph, he changes that formula and states that Joseph was "the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born." "Whom" is feminine in Greek, showing that Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus. (Matthew goes on to explain the virgin birth more fully in 1:18-25.) If Jesus had been the physical descendant of Joseph, He would have been barred from the throne of David by a curse on Jeconiah (Jer. 22:30; Matt. 1:11-12). But since Jesus was not the physical descendant of Jeconiah through Joseph, but rather his legal descendant, he qualifies as the legitimate son of David, heir to his throne. Jesus is the Messiah!

B. God fulfilled His promise: Jesus is the son of Abraham.

Jesus is not only the son of David, but also the son of Abraham (1:1). This takes us back to the covenant that God made with Abraham 2,000 years before Christ, where He promised Abraham that through his seed, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). There are preview glimpses of this through the Gentile women in the line of Christ. As we've seen, three of the four women listed were Gentiles, and the fourth was married to Uriah

the Hittite, a Gentile. This shows us that Jesus, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1), brings the blessing of Abraham beyond Israel to the nations. This comes to its fullness when Jesus, at the end of Matthew, commands His disciples to go and make disciples of *all the nations* (28:19). God is moving all of history to fulfill His covenant promises to Abraham and to David. Jesus, the son of David, will return in power and glory to reign on David's throne. Jesus, the son of Abraham, is blessing the nations as the gospel goes forth around the world.

### Conclusion

So this genealogy of Jesus the Messiah should give us great hope as we think on His birth. His first coming represented the fulfillment of a 2,000-year-old promise to Abraham and a 1,000-year-old promise to David. His Second Coming will fulfill the repeated New Testament promises that He will come to judge the earth. Although it seemed to Israel that God's promises to Abraham and to David might never be fulfilled, they were fulfilled in God's perfect timing. Although it may seem that Jesus' promise to come again may never be fulfilled, it will be fulfilled just as He said.

The question is, are you ready for that day? Have you turned from your sins and put your trust in Jesus as *your* Savior and Lord? The stories of Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba show us that God's mercy extends to all sinners who will repent and trust in Christ. The genealogy of Jesus as the son of David, the son of Abraham, shows that God keeps His covenant promises. Today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow may be the day of judgment. Come to Christ while you may!

### Application Questions

1. Someone says, "It's nice that you believe in Jesus, but I've got my own spiritual beliefs." How could this genealogy address this faulty line of thinking?
2. Some people like certain "positive" TV preachers because they do not mention sin. Can we avoid the sin issue and still have the gospel? Why/why not?
3. How could you use this genealogy when witnessing to a Jew? To a Gentile?

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